

TOPIC 13: Sir John Monash

BEFORE THE WAR

Sir John Monash grew up in difficult circumstances, but he was intelligent, strategic and worked hard for success. He openly attributed his achievements to “industry and concentration” instead of “genius”.

Monash (1865-1931) was born to Jewish Prussian parents in West Melbourne. When his father’s business failed, the family moved to Jerilderie, New South Wales.

Later, they returned to Melbourne where he was enrolled at Scotch College. Monash grew up in a cultured environment, partly due to his mother’s circle of friends, and both his parents had high expectations. He sang in the choir at the East Melbourne synagogue, learned piano, and excelled in maths, French and German.

At the University of Melbourne, he studied engineering, and read English literature and history at the public library. He failed his first-year exams but was determined to succeed.

The following years were erratic due to his mother becoming fatally ill and his father’s business failing again. He helped the family income by working on design and construction projects, including the Princes Bridge and the Outer Circle railway, where gained experience that would prove invaluable on the Western Front.



Sir John Monash

MILITARY TRAINING

Monash joined the Victorian Rifles and then the Garrison Artillery, deciding on a career in engineering and soldiering. He married in 1891, and he and his wife, Victoria, had a daughter two years later. In his spare time, he completed degrees in Law and Arts, adding to the Engineering qualification that he managed to finish.

He lectured in artillery, weapons, explosives and mechanics, and was promoted to captain in 1895. He was appointed commander of the North Melbourne Battery and became a specialist in coastal artillery, administration and military command.

Outside the military, Monash co-founded a civil engineering business that ultimately failed and left him poverty stricken, but he rebuilt another, Monier, which specialised in reinforced concrete construction – and there he found his fortune.

His military career also took a marked turn for the better; he was appointed commander of the Australian Intelligence Corps in Victoria, undertaking military mapping, tactical exercises, military history, and general staff work. In 1913 he was promoted to colonel in the 13th Infantry Brigade.

LEADERSHIP

On the Western Front, Monash commanded 200,000 troops, including soldiers from Australia, Britain and the United States.

When the First World War broke out, he was appointed commander of the 4th Infantry Brigade, controlling 17 ships that reached Egypt in January 1915. After Gallipoli he was promoted to brigadier general and his troops fought at Sari Bair, Hill 971, Hill 60 and near the Suez Canal. In July 1916, as major general commanding the 3rd Division, his troops served in Armentieres, Messines, Broodseinde, Passchendaele and Ploegsteert.

In 1918, he was knighted in the field by King George V in recognition of his outstanding service.

He was promoted to lieutenant-general, commanding the Australian Imperial Force and American troops. The Battle of Hamel (4 July 1918) was regarded by many as his greatest hour, earning him a reputation as a commander of genius. Monash planned the battle to last 90 minutes; it finished in 93, foreshadowing the 'blitzkrieg' (lightning war) of the Second World War.

A series of victories followed – Chuignes, Mont St Quentin and Peronne and Hargicourt – with relatively low casualties (5000).

With the Australians' final battle at Montbrehain, the Hindenburg Line was finally broken.

After the Armistice on 11 November 1918, Monash oversaw the repatriation of Australian troops over an eight-month period, providing further evidence of his administrative skills.



Sir John Monash and General Joseph Hobbs passing the saluting base outside Buckingham Palace 1919

HIS LEGACY

Monash was Australia's most accomplished senior commander of the First World War and, arguably, in Australia's military history. His command of the 3rd Division and later of the Australian Corps in 1918 is remembered for its remarkable achievements and high levels of skill, thoroughness and competence.

Monash valued men over machines, coordinating all resources to preserve lives, and he encouraged individualism, famously telling his men: "I don't care a damn for your loyal service when you think I am right; when I really want it most is when you think I am wrong."

Soon after the war, Monash's wife died from breast cancer and he wrote books about his experiences on the Western Front. He took up several prominent jobs including head of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria and he was involved in organising military commemorations, including Anzac Day and the Shrine of Remembrance.

In the 1920s, according to his biographer Geoffrey Serle, Sir John Monash was regarded as Australia's greatest living Australian. He died in 1931 from a heart attack, at the age of 66, and was given a state funeral. He asked that his gravestone simply bear the words "John Monash".

In 1958, Monash University in Melbourne took its name and inspiration from Sir John's personal philosophy: "Adopt as your fundamental creed that you will equip yourself for life, not solely for your own benefit but for the benefit of the whole community."

Further reading: Geoffrey Serle. *John Monash: A Biography*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982.

Students at Level 1/2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key life events of Sir John Monash • Outline the leadership skills displayed by Monash as a General on the Western Front
Students at Level 2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand why Monash was such a well-respected General during the First World War • Analyse how Monash's battle tactics led to Allied victories in the war and understand why this shift in tactics was so significant

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Level 1/2/3	<p>The key purpose of this section is for students to understand the life and achievements of Sir John Monash. A particularly significant aspect of this topic is for students to consider what makes a good leader, what skills they admire in a leader and whether Monash displayed these skills through his leadership on the Western Front.</p> <p>A way this can be achieved is by having students consider good leaders in their own lives. What makes this person such a great leader? Is it their personality, their intelligence, their appearance? Pinpoint the specific qualities of the person that make them a good leader. Students then use this to consider what leadership skills Monash displayed while on the Western Front.</p>
Level 2/3	<p>At this level students critically analyse Monash's personal life, particularly his religious upbringing in a very secular society and his relationship with family members while away at war. This is achieved through the analysis of primary sources including a letter written from Monash to his family while on the Western Front, and a quote from Monash explaining his unique tactics when in battle.</p>



Lieutenant General Sir John Monash being knighted by King George V in France

- 1 Using the information provided in the background, create a timeline of Sir John Monash's major life events from his birth up until his death.
- 1 Write down the name of someone in your life you consider to be a good leader. Write down all the qualities that make this person a good leader. Now, create a list of the leadership skills Monash displayed that made him such a strong leader (think of at least 5 skills). Do you see any similarities in each of your lists?
- 1 Monash estimated the Battle of Hamel would take 90 minutes. How long did it actually take? Make a list of activities in your life that take approximately 90 minutes (think of at least 6 activities).
- 1 Imagine you had the opportunity to meet Sir John Monash after he returned from the Western Front. Create a series of questions you would ask him about his life, his experiences on the Western Front, and his military career (minimum 8 questions).

- 1 Read the following letter Monash wrote to his family while he was on the Western Front

Baron Manfred von Richthofen, known as the 'Red Baron' from his distinctive red fighter plane, was Germany's greatest flying ace and its national hero. He was regarded as a deadly opponent and a legendary figure even to his enemies. The location Villers-Bretonneux, was defended by Australians in March 1918 and then recaptured by them in one night. The town became the site of the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery and the Australian National Memorial.

France
2 May 1918

Dearest Wife

I enclose herewith a tiny piece of the red fabric off Richtofen's aeroplane, the 'Red Falcon, in which he was brought down by us. I also have a piece of the wooden propeller from the same machine. ...

Last night we brought down another plane quite near my chateau. The pilot was slightly wounded, but the officer-observer was quite all right. He was brought in to me; I gave him a glass of wine, and he talked freely. He told me that the German Flieger Corps much appreciated the action of our No. 3 Australian Squadron in placing a wreath of Richthofen's grave. ...

[I enclose also a] cutting from a French daily paper – 'The Australians cover themselves with glory.' You can hardly picture the delight of the French population during the three weeks when the 150,000 Australian arrived on this front to cover Amiens. They knew it meant for them safety and a retention of their homes and property. It was the same story when the 1st Australian Division was hastily sent back to Flanders and stopped the Boche advance west of Bailleul ...

I had a letter from Jeannie Plouvier (late of Steenwerck), in which she tells me that she and her mother had just ten minutes in which to clear out, in the clothes they stood up in, and they had to go the first 35 miles on foot, under shell fire.

[Here is also] the London Daily Telegraph's account of our recapture of Villers-Bretonneux by the 13th and 15th Brigades. In my opinion this counter-attack at night, without artillery support, is the finest thing yet done in the war by Australians or any other troops. Philip Gibbs's article is the first public avowal of this brilliant episode which took place in the early hours of Anzac Day. The total prisoners taken finally exceeded 900.

The British public is at last beginning to sit up and take notice, and from an attitude of cold and rather critical patronage towards Australians, and vague allusion to their 'slack discipline' (forsooth!), the people in England, the English troops and officers, and finally the War Office itself, are beginning to realize that the Australians are some of the best troops in the whole Empire, always to be relied upon, not merely to hold securely all ground but also to carry out every reasonable task set them. ...

Your husband

John Monash

- Using your own knowledge, describe what was life like for soldiers on the Western Front during the First World War? Explain the difference between what Monash mentions in his letter compared to reality. Consider whether he is attempting to detach from the situation and events occurring on the Western Front, and if so, how is he doing this in the letter?

- Evaluate the usefulness and reliability of this source. Consider the type of source this is, who it is written by, when is it written, and what was its purpose.

- Imagine you are Sir John Monash leading a battalion on the Western Front. Write a postcard home to one of your loved ones explaining your day-to-day life. Think of the things you would want them to know, the things you wouldn't want them to know, and the things you want to know about back home.

▮ Monash grew up in Jewish family in the early 1900's Australian society. Use the internet to determine what was the dominant religion in Australia during this time? What do you think life was like in the religious minority? Consider the implications of Monash being a Jewish man during the time of the First World War.

▮ The following quote is how Monash described the need to move away from 'outdated' British tactics:

"The true role of infantry was not to expend itself upon heroic physical effort, not to wither away under merciless machine-gun fire, not to impale itself on hostile bayonets, but on the contrary, to advance under the maximum possible protection of the maximum possible array of mechanical resources, in the form of guns, machine-guns, tanks, mortars and aeroplanes; to advance with as little impediment as possible; to be relieved as far as possible of the obligation to fight their way forward."

Using this source and the information provided in the background, write a paragraph to compare and contrast the tactics employed by Monash with those 'traditional' tactics implemented during the beginning of the war.